



Coaching for School Improvement

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Friday Night Lights

Last evening, my husband and I watched the series finale of *Friday Night Lights*. We've been fans of the program since its start five years ago, not for the football but for the fully developed characters with so much personality, passion, and heart.

Each time I watch an episode, I'm struck by the similarities – and differences – between Coach Taylor's work with his young athletes and our work as coaches with schools paving a path toward excellence. I realized that I have learned a lot about that work from watching Coach Taylor and reflecting on these similarities and differences.

I empathize with Coach Taylor as I watch him on the sidelines during a crucial game. While he is clearly in charge of the East Dillon Lions, assigning players and calling plays, he is only indirectly in control of the outcome of their work. He faces surprise, disappointment, thrill, dismay as his athletes succeed or fall short when tackling, kicking, or passing the football.

The coach of an improvement team also stands on the sidelines, working with the team and team leader, neither as master nor servant but as collaborator. The coach models, guides, prompts and challenges the team to help them move in productive directions, but has no direct control over their actions. Unlike the high school athletic coach, an SI coach can't require extra practice time or send everyone to bed early.

I'm most envious of the unquestioned commitment to a common purpose of Coach Taylor and his team. Their goal is clear—score touchdowns and prevent the other team from reaching the goal line. The young men are willing to endure strenuous training and punishing contact to reach their objective. How much more effective would my work be if I could ignite a similar single-minded commitment to a common purpose among the improvement teams I work with! Unlike a football game, though, the goal of school change is much more diffuse than precise.

All may agree that the purpose of school improvement is to design and implement an educational program that ensures all students achieve success – but then we have to ask, what do we consider 'success'? In education systems, 'success' is not as straightforward as simply carrying a ball across a line in the turf.

'Success' can mean something simple, like reading a set of single syllable words or counting to 100. Or 'success' can be as complex as balancing the factors needed to maintain a self-contained ecosystem. How do we make explicit that 'success' includes the goals of good citizenship, lifelong learning, and moral character? And how do we generate commitment to that vision of 'success'?

The appeal of the character of Coach Taylor is strengthened because he, too, sets greater goals for the young people than just making touchdowns. How he goes about motivating his charges to pursue "clear eyes, full hearts" is hard to make out in 60 minutes per week, but the script writers lead us to believe he succeeds. How would the script writers portray the success of a coach in helping a school team attain excellence?